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AUTHOR Scollon, Suzanne Bau Kam
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ABSTRACT

A weekly professional development seminar, designed to help University of Alaska education professors (four White, one Alaska Native) become more culturally sensitive in multicultural classrooms and discover ways teaching may construct barriers to participation by Alaska Native students, was supplemented by videotapes of participants' teaching behaviors and by student opinions, obtained by third-party observers. Factors affecting class participation were instructors' expectations, relationship between instructors and students, professors' efforts to increase reticent students' participation, domination of class discussion by a few individuals, attitudes of respect for elders and teachers, spatial arrangements of classrooms, eye contact, and different values held by different Native groups. Use of problematic words, intonation and non-verbal cues, and students' and professors' different expectations were involved in role distancing. Concerning logic of presentation, professors generally liked to begin with theory, while students wanted narratives of specific cases and often considered that professors were failing to get to the point. Study of classroom rhythm showed that Native students were slower to raise their hands to enter discussion than were White, urban students, and were often not called on. Obvious seminar results were professors' increased sense of humility and awareness/appreciation of different assumptions about approaches to teaching. (MH)

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Professional Development Seminar: A Model for Making Higher Education More Culturally Sensitive

By

Suzanne Bau Kam Scollon
Center for Cross-Cultural Studies
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
and
University of Alaska Instructional Telecommunications Consortium

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Professional Development Seminar:
A Model for making Higher Education More Culturally Sensitive

Suzanne Bau Kam Scollon
Center for Cross-Cultural Studies
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
and
University of Alaska Instructional
Telecommunications Consortium
Paper presented at the Third Annual
Conference of the National Association
for Asian and Pacific American Education
Honolulu, April 1981

Introduction

Alaska Natives are not achieving educational equity at the University of Alaska. Their dropout rate is high, and they are under-represented, especially at upper class levels. In an effort to identify communicative barriers to access to higher education, we are conducting an ethnographic study of the ways in which the University interacts with the community of Alaska residents it is mandated to serve.

The category "Alaska Native" is a legal one deriving from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. It represents no traditional tribal identity and in earlier uses frequently suggested an invidious contrast with the so-called "civilized" residents of the state. Since the passage of the Native Claims Settlement Act the term "Alaska Native" has taken on a positive meaning in association with the political unity being achieved in the lands issue. It is in this latter sense that I use the term in this paper.

There were traditionally 20 different cultural groups in what is now Alaska. While the 20 native languages are not all maintained, culturally distinct communicative styles are used by Alaska Native students. These styles do not often match the communicative style characteristic of university

faculty and staff, who are predominantly middle-class Whites.

One part of our study, funded by a National Institute of Education grant to Ron Scollon, looks at how the models of higher education held by the university are manifested in institutional practices which may limit access to certain classes of students. In the Professional Development Seminar, which is the topic of this paper, we are looking at classroom instruction on the Fairbanks campus to discover ways in which this instruction can be made more responsive to the needs of students with different cultural backgrounds and learning styles.[1] In a third piece of this ethnographic study, sponsored by the University of Alaska Instructional Telecommunications Consortium, we are trying to understand how the mediation of various modes of telecommunication affects the relationship between instructor and students, and how instructional systems can optimally utilize telecommunication networks to serve rural residents.

The Professional Development Seminar

The Professional Development Seminar was conceived as a means of examining teaching in college classrooms where students were of different cultural backgrounds. Participants are professors of education all of whom have been involved in both pre-service and inservice training in cross-cultural education for teachers around the State of Alaska. Of the five professors, four are White and one is Alaska Native. The idea was for them to look at their own teaching to see in what ways it is effective in multicultural

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[1] The Professional Development Seminar is supported by a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

classrooms as well as to discover ways in which their teaching may be constituting barriers to the participation of Alaska Native students. It was critical for us to obtain an objective record of classroom teaching and to get the reactions of students and Native persons. A Native graduate student and myself were enlisted to videotape classes of each participant, obtain feedback from students, and provide a third-party view of what was going on.

The Seminar met once a week to discuss teaching and to view videotapes of the classes. The most immediate effect of this was that each participant found it a shock to view himself on videotape. The most obvious result was an increased sense of humility and an increased awareness and appreciation of different assumptions about and approaches to teaching.

Results

While the tapes provide a data base for research into university teaching in a multicultural setting, the main value of the Professional Development Seminar was the process itself. No one method of teaching was agreed upon as being most effective. It was clear that different methods "worked" for different participants. In addition, participants had different fundamental assumptions about the nature of teaching. The fact that university professors receive no formal training in teaching certainly contributes to these varying assumptions about the nature of teaching.

Students were open in offering opinions to the third party observers, and their perceptions often surprised the professors. Students were favorably impressed by the willingness of their instructors to expose their teaching to criticism, and the weekly seminars did much to raise teaching to the consciousness of the instructors. There are some indications that their teaching improved as a result, but we do not know how long lasting the changes are.

Some students feel a need to establish a relationship with the professor outside of his role in the classroom. They need to know something about the professor as a person, something about his background, before they know how to interpret what he says in class. In working with some students, we were able to provide some of this background information which changed their perceptions of what they were hearing in class.

Professors were also able to obtain feedback from students that they would not ordinarily get. The graduate student was able to elicit comments like, "I found out that Gussaks (White men, derived from Russian) are human." While she protected the anonymity of the students' comments, she was able to sort out some of the reactions by ethnic group, finding students from one group saying one thing and students from another saying the opposite. For example, White students said they liked a small class because there was a lot of discussion, while Native students said the class was too small, implying they found the frequent discussions tedious.

Participation

University instructors tend to have expectations for class participation which are often not met by Native students. These expectations were discussed in the Seminar. Some instructors assign grades at least partly on the basis of participation in class. Others who do not explicitly evaluate participation admit that they are influenced to an indeterminate extent by what students say to them in and out of class. Students who show interest by asking questions are often given the benefit of the doubt.

Though professors are likely to stereotype Native students as unresponsive, we saw in doing micro-analysis of classroom videotapes that the roles of

instructor and student are jointly performed. By attempting to understand how this is done, we hoped to find ways of changing some of the behavior of the professor to result in more satisfactory outcomes.

Much time is spent in establishing the relationship between instructor and student. In many classes, the instructor walks up to the podium, takes out stacks of paper, and spends much time facing the students and shuffling papers, whether they be lecture notes, handouts, or assignments. During this time, students are entering the classroom, finding seats, getting out notebooks and pens, and waiting. The time of everyone's arrival is determined by the schedule, and from the time of arrival each individual strives to achieve synchrony with what is supposed to happen. A person walking out the door before the class is over needs to be accounted for, whether he is taking a break to smoke or leaving to catch a bus. Every movement of the instructor is attended to, and similarly the instructor interprets the actions of the students, though he can not attend equally to all of them.

Professors did various things, consciously and unconsciously, to increase the participation of reticent students. Some of them tried to get everyone to say something on the first day of class, to break the ice. In a small class of ten students sitting around the table, the instructor had each student give some personal background and say why they were taking the course. Some of the students felt uncomfortable doing this, but in retrospect thought it was a good idea. Another instructor had students first write down on paper what they wanted out of the course, then say one thing out loud. That accustomed them to speaking in class about something they had had time to think about, and active participation continued throughout

the semester. Another instructor simply took roll at the beginning of the semester in order to identify names with faces and let everyone know where everyone was from.

Several of the instructors fell into the habit of generating discussion by posing a question and writing down responses on the blackboard. While facing the blackboard, their eye contact with the students is cut off. Some students who had raised their hands got tired of waiting to be acknowledged, and began speaking. Others then appeared to feel free to contribute comments. Surprisingly, it was in these moments of apparent non-receptivity, when the instructor's back was turned, that there was more equal participation from students. Students who usually get the floor by raising their hands tended not to speak without being given the floor.

Participation by students is not necessarily valued, however, and much discussion took place over this issue. Many students complain about the few people, usually non-Native, who tend to dominate discussions. These people, when not given the floor as frequently as they would like, tend to feel discriminated against. The issue of rhythm, which I will discuss later, plays a part here. Many students hesitate to speak in class because they are brought up to respect elders and teachers. Any comment they might make risks the implication that they know more than the teacher. Any question either risks criticism or makes them feel as if they have not paid attention. Many of these students feel more comfortable with writing comments.

Another problem is that members of different Native groups have different values. Some prefer small group discussions, while others prefer lectures. A method tailored for one group risks losing members of another group.

Some students praised a teacher for not "spotlighting" individuals by singling them out for attention. Others complained about his failure to do so.

Participation in part depends on the spatial arrangements of the classroom. Students who sit within what Edward Hall defines as social distance tend to participate more than those who sit at what Hall calls public distance. In most cases students choose to sit at these distances. They seem to prefer arrangements in which they can make these choices, such as a large classroom with many seats available. There is no general agreement on this matter either, however. While many students enjoy the privacy allowed by a large space in which they can speak softly to those close enough to hear, others feel they should be able to hear everything that goes on in the classroom.

Role distancing

Students have various expectations for the role of the professor. Some expect him to be an authority, somewhat like the clergymen with whom they had their first institutional contact. Others expect him to be friendly and informal, like teachers they may have had at boarding school. Professors take different attitudes toward their role. Some dress formally and lecture, while others dress informally and prefer open-ended discussions. Comments made by a professor that create distance between him and the professor's role may be misinterpreted. For example, remarks made to set students at ease by playing down the professor's expertise may be taken at face value.

Here are some examples from one class session of what we call role distancing:

Does anyone know what we mean by "ethnocentrism"? I looked it up in the dictionary.

Here the professor pretends to not know the term.

...pretty blatant--what's another word for blatant--pretty crass.

The professor shows that he assumes students' ignorance of the word 'blatant'.

"control of means of production and distribution"--that's a Marxist phrase, but it's a good one.

In this case that professor takes some distance from his implied knowledge of Marxism.

Another area is codified law, and all I'm saying here is....

Again, this is a simplification displayed as talking down. Or in another case:

Yeah, I'm probably complicating this more than I need to.

In playing back the videotape of this session, several people remarked on the use of big words. A Native professor noted that many of the attempted explanations were not any clearer than the words themselves. A non-Native professor thought the instructor seemed to be apologizing for using ten-dollar words. A Native student complained that the instructor did not explain or clearly define terms he used. We were struck again by the difference in word usage between instructors who assume knowledge of technical terms and students who expect unfamiliar words to be defined. When people come from different backgrounds, it is difficult to determine which words might cause problems in understanding and which words might help clarify unfamiliar ones.

Besides problematic words, intonation and non-verbal cues may be difficult to interpret. A use of role distancing which students have trouble understanding is the regular academic practice of setting up a straw man and ironically

speaking from his point of view. A professor trying to explicate the colonialist position says ironically,

> I'm here to get what I can out of this country and as cheaply as possible.

A student takes offense at this position and questions how the professor can advocate this position. In this case the student missed the irony that was suggested by gesture and intonation. In communicating with someone from a different cultural background it is difficult to recognize the subtle cues that irony is being used. This may result in attributing the straw man's position to the speaker. This is coupled with the fact that many students expect the lecturer to maintain a consistent position and present and advocate that position.

Logic of presentation: general or specific

There may exist different logics than the Aristotelian logic we have come to expect in the classroom. For example, Sarah Michaels speaks of "topic chaining", a style used by grade-school Blacks, and Fred Erickson speaks of "the logic of the particular" used by Italian-American adolescents.

Students frequently complained, especially at the beginning of the semester, that a professor was "too general" or needed to be more "specific". The Native professor's class was said to be really interesting because "He really gets down to specifics." Native guest speakers usually begin their presentations with personal background, while non-Native professors prod them for theoretical assumptions.

To be more specific, a course on Alaska Native Politics started out with lectures on political theory. A student wanted to know what that had to do with Alaska Native Politics. Several weeks later students were

still waiting for the instructor to get specific. One day he was discussing the Federal laws which resulted in termination. Students started asking questions which amounted to asking him to give narrative accounts of what had happened to specific tribes which had been terminated. The instructor had prepared for class by familiarizing himself with the laws, while the students wanted accounts of what had actually happened in particular cases.

In a course on communicative differences, some students seemed to want information on how to communicate effectively, rather than a description of what goes wrong and why. Any general statements about cultural differences were at first taken as stereotyping and resisted.

Non-Native instructors hesitate to give specific information about Native affairs, because they cannot speak authoritatively from personal experience. They find general, theoretical statements more comfortable, not only because of their academic training, but because they do not risk talking about topics their students know more about then they.

In general, professors like to start out with theory and students like narratives of specific cases. It is important to emphasize that I am not saying that Alaska Natives think concretely while non-Native professors think abstractly. What I am saying is the order of presentation which begins with theoretical considerations and then introduces specific cases is often misunderstood as not getting to the point. What is preferred by many students is detailing specific cases and then drawing out the theoretical principles from those cases.

Rhythm

One of the participants in the Professional Development Seminar, Ron Scollon, looked at the rhythms of samples of the classes recorded. We

started out looking at the effects of variation in students' response time on participation in class, as I mentioned earlier. White, urban students tended to raise their hands whenever they perceived an opportunity for discussion, while Native students from bush villages did so seldom, if ever. What typically happens is that the usual rhythm of a classroom dictates that the ones whose hands go up first are called on to speak. The time allotted for discussion is used up before the slower and perhaps more thoughtful ones get a chance. By consciously waiting before calling on students, Scollon was able to allow more Native students to enter into discussion. What happens, according to Native students, is that they sometimes do not think of an appropriate response until the class is over. In the meantime, the instructor may have felt that he is not getting his material across.

In one videotaped segment, a student tried to make a comment on ethnocentrism, which the instructor had just asked about. While the teacher assumed that no one knew what he was talking about, the student's comment minutes later when she had finally gotten the floor clearly indicates that she knew what ethnocentrism is all about. By this time, though, the topic is no longer on the floor and her comment is regarded as irrelevant.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to remind you that what I have been describing is a project in faculty development, not research. Therefore what we learned are not "results" of research to be disseminated so much as ways of looking at our own teaching in the process of doing that teaching. It has been my intention to suggest that this process which we would call interactive

inquiry is workable and a valuable process for both faculty and students. It is a process which involves the people being served, rather than research that is reported on and later applied to groups which may or may not resemble the research population.